

Department of Health and Human Services has the right leader at the helm going forward. And for my money and my judgment, that leader is Xavier Becerra. I believe he is the right person for this job at this point in our Nation's history.

As a key member of the Biden administration, he will work with the White House. He will work with us in the Congress to tackle the coronavirus pandemic and to coordinate our Nation's response to it.

Just as he has done throughout his career, he will fight to expand affordable healthcare, address persistent health disparities, and restore HHS's mission to protect the health and well-being of all Americans.

Madam President, I have heard several of my Republican colleagues calling into question Xavier Becerra's—Attorney General Becerra's qualifications to serve as HHS Secretary. Obviously they are free to express their concerns. As Senators, it is our duty to vet and evaluate Cabinet nominees and make sure that we believe they are going to be best able to serve the American people. I take the responsibility seriously. I know our Presiding Officer does as well. But let me set the record straight, if I could, on Xavier Becerra. I am confident that with his decades of experience working on healthcare issues in Congress and as California's attorney general, he will be an invaluable part of President Biden's administration as we work together to combat the pandemic nationally.

Some of the critics on the other side of the aisle say: What does he know about healthcare? Well, as it turns out, he served for I want to say two decades on the House Committee on Ways and Means. The last time I checked—you may want to double-check me on this—I think the primary responsibility of that committee is Medicare, and for somebody who served that long on that committee, I bet he knows a thing or two about Medicare. As it turns out, he does.

Throughout his career in public service, Xavier Becerra has shown an unwavering commitment to protecting and expanding healthcare availability for millions of American families and workers, especially those in vulnerable communities who remain underserved.

In the House of Representatives, he was a senior member of the Ways and Means Committee, which helped to make the Affordable Care Act, which is based on a Republican idea, I think out of the Heritage Foundation in 1993 that, as I mentioned earlier, MITT ROMNEY helped make a household word in the State of Massachusetts when he was Governor there. And I think half of the people who had healthcare coverage—who didn't have it when we created the ACA have it. They have it today. We cut in half the number of people who don't have access to healthcare coverage.

In the State of Delaware, the cost of coverage is actually dropping in the ex-

changes. It has dropped by I think 19 percent over the last 2 years alone, as market forces are taking place and taking hold.

As attorney general of California, as has been mentioned, he led the charge for a coalition of States to defend the Affordable Care Act against multiple attempts by the Trump administration to dismantle this landmark legislation altogether.

I once asked somebody—I asked him. I said: What is it about your experience that would suggest you could run a big operation like the Department of Health and Human Services?

He said: Well, I have run the Department of Justice in California. It is the second largest Department of Justice in the country, second only to the Federal Department of Justice.

I forget how many thousands—maybe tens of thousands—of employees they have, but it is a huge operation in a huge State with a ton of people.

Xavier Becerra brought together attorneys general from both sides of the aisle to hold opioid manufacturers accountable for the addiction crisis that we are still struggling with.

When the pandemic hit, he went to bat for Californians on everything from protections for our workers from exposure to COVID-19, increasing transparency in nursing homes, to securing key safeguards for the rights of frontline healthcare personnel.

His past leadership is a major reason why President Biden is asking him today to accept the responsibilities of overseeing responses to many of our Nation's most urgent needs, including the distribution of COVID-19 vaccinations, restoring the public confidence in vital public health institutions, and boosting family health and financial security in the wake of the pandemic.

With so much of the COVID-19 response being executed at the State and local levels, we are fortunate that President Biden has chosen as his HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra, a leader with relevant, on-the-ground, State-based experience.

As a former State treasurer, former Governor, former chairman of the National Governors Association, to have somebody with this kind of State-based experience, what a blessing that would be.

As the head of the largest State department of justice in the Nation, overseeing thousands of employees, Attorney General Becerra has a proven track record and the management experience necessary to take on the massive operations at HHS. He will also make, as Senator DURBIN has mentioned, history as the first Latino American to take on this role, providing important perspective as Latinos and other minority communities continue to be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

As we try to make sure that about a third of the American people who are saying they are not going to take the vaccine—they don't care; they are going to take a chance—and a lot of

those people are Latino—wouldn't it be nice to have a Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services who could reach out to that community, literally reach out to them and touch them and convince them that, no, this is something they should do; they should take this chance and be glad they did.

Four years ago, this body confirmed President Trump's nominee for Health and Human Services within just 20 days—20 days from the start of his administration. We knew then that this role was important to fill. It took us 20 days.

Now, in the midst of a deadly pandemic, one that has taken the lives of over 530,000 Americans—a toll that exceeds the number of American deaths on the battlefields of World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam war, in which I served—we cannot afford to let another day go by without confirming Xavier Becerra.

With all of that, I just want to say, colleagues, it is time. It is over time, and we need to confirm Xavier. I think—in fact, I am convinced he will do a good job. He will make us proud. We need him. The President needs him. And with him on board as the leader of HHS, he can go to work on behalf of the American people and put this pandemic behind us for good, and we need that day to come soon.

I don't see anybody else waiting to speak. I think maybe I should suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

NO HATE ACT

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Madam President, we are working today in the shadow of a truly hideous, horrific series of murders that occurred yesterday in Atlanta, GA, and I want to start by expressing my sympathies to the families that are affected, families of innocent women who were gunned down heinously by a murderer there. Eight lives were taken by that gunman, six of them Asian women.

There is an active, ongoing investigation, and I have no intention of prejudging the outcome. Justice must be done, and I have confidence in the law enforcement authorities of Atlanta that they will assure that justice is done.

So we don't know for sure what the gunman's motivation was, but we know eight of the women were Asian, and we know for sure that this horrific shooting rampage is only the latest egregious incident in a sickening, despicable trend of anti-Asian-American, or AAPI, violence that has terrorized the Asian-American community over recent months.

And we know many of these incidents were, in fact, hate crimes motivated by

bias, bigotry, and prejudice. Now, hate-motivated violence, as Attorney Garland said at his confirmation hearing, “tear[s] at the fabric of our society . . . make[s] our citizens worried about walking [on] the streets and exercising even the most normal rights.”

And he is absolutely correct. It tears at our society. It degrades our trust in each other and in the fairness of America and the survivability of values and rights that are central to our democracy.

The increase in violence against Asian Americans must end, and we all know it. We all say it, but we must do it. In Congress, we must do everything in our power to provide law enforcement and prosecutors with the resources and the tools they need to overcome it, to successfully fight it, which they can do. And they need the will and determination to wield the tools and resources that we give them because they have to not only investigate, as they will this gunman, but also to effectively prosecute and assure just punishment.

We don't know for sure the motivation. We have evidence. And we can't say for sure how many hate crimes there have been against Asian Americans or others in our great country, but we have a pretty good idea where it all came from.

The rise in anti-Asian-American violence started with the previous administration, who failed to address and manage the COVID-19 pandemic, and rather than listen to the scientists and work to stop its spread, it sought to scapegoat a part of our country. It sought to scapegoat Asian Americans with xenophobic and hate-filled rhetoric.

Words have consequences. We all say it. We all know it. And we must denounce the words that spur and spew hatred and cause or contribute to hate crimes. Hate crimes are a growing scourge. The numbers are surging, whether it is against Asian Americans, Muslim Americans, Jewish Americans, Black Americans. When it is against Americans, it is against America. Words do have consequences.

Stop AAPI Hate, which tracks violence and harassment against the AAPI community, Asian Americans, received more than 1,100 reports of COVID-related harassment, discrimination, and assault in its first two operational weeks last March. And now it has recorded more than 3,800 incidents since the start of the pandemic—3,800 incidents of harassment, discrimination, and sometimes physical assault—spurred and encouraged and condoned by public officials who used that hate-filled rhetoric to cover their own failures in dealing with the pandemic.

As the investigators and prosecutors go forward, we will learn more, and we need to let them do their jobs. But that doesn't mean we should remain silent, nor does it give us an excuse to be inert. We need to denounce that kind of rhetoric. We need to take action.

I have proposed a measure called the NO HATE Act, which would provide more training for investigators and more resources for hotlines because these hate crimes are typically and repeatedly unreported, and it would provide more incentives for reporting and new penalties—or encourage the imposition of penalties—that truly fit the crime.

Hate crimes are corrosive to our social fabric. They corrupt the pillars of our society, and their effect is unmistakable.

They traumatize and terrorize the communities that are their targets—in this case, Asian Americans, who have become more and more fearful as these incidents have multiplied. We all have a part to do in stopping this scourge. And we know that it is rampant, in part, because of the White supremacists and domestic terrorism and violent extremism that showed its ugly face in this Chamber earlier this year. It showed its brutal, cruel force in this building.

It is the same virus and cancer that is metastasizing in this country today. And its visible forms are the assaults, harassment, and discrimination that may well have been reflected in those murders yesterday.

I hope the NO HATE Act passes, but it won't be for a while. I hope we can take other action, but it will take time. And in the meantime, we can all take it as a moral imperative as our duty to denounce—not condoned by our silence—these groups and their extremist ideologies in White supremacists that perpetuate and expand the virus and cancer of hate crimes and hatred. Hate speech—fighting words—incitement in our society.

NOMINATION OF XAVIER BECERRA

Now, a bright spot for America today is the confirmation, which we hope will happen in the next 24 hours, of the first Latino Secretary of Health and Human Services in America, the first. He was the first in his working-class family to go to college. He broke barriers throughout his career.

Xavier Becerra, presently the attorney general of California, will be a leader of toughness, bravery, and vision at the Department of Health and Human Services.

I stand here as a former attorney general, actually, for 20 years. I know well how much of that job is spent on healthcare policy, and I know also the management skills it takes to achieve real concrete results.

Attorney General Becerra is deeply qualified because of his work as State attorney general, but he also enjoys a wealth of other experience, both personal and professional, that make him exactly the right person at this moment for that job. He knows the importance of healthcare—equitable healthcare, reducing the disparities in healthcare in our country that afflict us now.

We have been in a healthcare crisis for more than a year, the deepest, most

painful healthcare crisis in our lives and maybe for a full century, a time of heartbreak and hardship, when a deadly, insidious virus has threatened economic upheaval and disaster. It is a pandemic that has left no family untouched, as all of us in this Chamber know, and no community unscathed.

We have lost more than half a million of our fellow citizens and people to COVID-19, including 7,800-plus in Connecticut. While there is light at the end of the tunnel, each day brings a new loss. And we don't know how long that tunnel may be.

The Biden administration has been laser-focused on ending this pandemic since day one. Every day, more and more Americans are receiving the vaccine. Every day, more and more Americans are beginning to see the big, bold benefits of the American Rescue Plan that President Biden signed last week, and every day we are seeing strong leadership from the Biden administration in addressing this deep crisis.

While there is hope at this moment, there are immense healthcare challenges still to be overcome, from increasing healthcare affordability and reducing the uninsured rate to lowering drug costs, to fighting back against healthcare disparities and protecting reproductive rights, and, I would repeat, lowering prescription drug costs. Job No. 1 for America, lowering prescription drug costs. Job No. 2, lowering prescription drug costs. We need to reduce the prices of medicine that Americans need every day, aside from the pandemic, every day. Prescription drug prices plague them, cause them worry, force them to make tough choices between eating and using the medicine, paying their rent, and buying the drugs they need to survive.

Attorney General Becerra served as deputy attorney general in California and later as a member of the State assembly before he went to the House of Representatives, here in the Capitol, for more than two decades. As a Congressman—and I think this point is really important—then-Representative Xavier Becerra fought to pass the Affordable Care Act, and then he fought to defend it against the Trump administration.

As California's attorney general, he was a warrior in fighting to preserve the ACA, and he will continue to fight for the men and women who depend on the ACA. And more and more of them, fortunately, are taking advantage of it because of the American Rescue Plan.

He is also a leader in taking on Big Tobacco. I sued the tobacco companies, helped to lead a multi-State attorney general group, and I know it takes courage to stand up and speak out and act against Big Tobacco. And he has done more. He has taken that fight to a new frontier. He is committed to protecting our children from the scourge of flavored tobacco and the insidious products—often they are flavored too—that are sold by vaping giants, which now include some tobacco companies.